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ABSTRACT

The Carnegie Foundation commissioned a series of essays as part of the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID). The essays and essayists represent six disciplines that are part of the CID: chemistry, education, English, history, mathematics, and neuroscience. The essay explores the Ph.D. in English and suggests changes the author would make in departmental culture to improve the program. The essay discusses access to the Ph.D. and entry and persistence in the profession of teaching English in college. It describes the changes in admissions policies and curriculum and in the hurdles students must leap in pursuing the degree. Paternalism and patronizing persist in English studies, and women and minorities continue to be excluded in many instances. Inclusive admissions policies that did not favor intense competition would ignore the Graduate Record Examinations and look at the qualities of the student. Graduate study could be made more open-ended and wide-ranging, but would benefit from a clear and detailed articulation of what constitutes the purview of English studies. In the "new" Ph.D. program, graduate students would be colleagues rather than acolytes, partners in learning. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

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CARNEGIE ESSAYS ON THE DOCTORATE

ENGLISH

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RETHINKING THE PH.D. IN ENGLISH

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The Carnegie Foundation commissioned a collection of essays as part of the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID). Essays and essayists represent six disciplines that are part of the CID: chemistry, education, English, history, mathematics and neuroscience. Intended to engender conversation about the conceptual foundation of doctoral education, the essays are a starting point and not the last word in disciplinary discussions. Those faculty members, students, and administrators who work in the discipline are the primary, among multiple, audiences for each of these essays.

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HOOD/HS

It's no exaggeration to say that I marvel almost every day at the fact that I am a professor of English, that I have tenure, that I have enjoyed over 25 years of teaching and research in a field I love. It's also safe to say that no one among my teachers, or even my family, would have predicted this eventuality. After all, when I won the typing medal (!) in ninth grade, my father was certain that I had a great career as a secretary ahead of me and assumed I would take such a position after high school. Only after I won a small teaching scholarship to my state university (the University of Florida) did I secure permission to "go off to college." Once there, I learned to live down to expectations: girls shouldn't be too smart. But my intense experience with reading (I was regularly punished for reading books in elementary school when I was supposed to be doing other things) paid off, and I not only did pretty well in my courses; I also came to understand that I really liked to learn and that I was besotted with reading and writing. And I was increasingly sure I wanted to teach. So one day I ventured into my advisor's office to ask about advanced graduate study. I could remember talking with him only once before, when he had signed some forms for me. He listened to me for a few minutes and then dismissed the idea out of hand, saying that I wasn't cut out for a Ph.D., that I should go home and have a family. I didn't even consider objecting; I just left the office, left the University, and got a teaching job. It took seven years for me to gain the confidence to try again.

I completed my Ph.D. in 1977, and by then some of that patronizing "it's not for you" attitude was gone from our departments. But not all. For all the change we have seen (the National Center for Educational Statistics reports that the number of women entering advanced degree programs increased almost sixty percent between 1989 and 1999), much in our departmental culture needs to change. I want to open this essay, then, by talking briefly about access to the Ph.D. and about entry—and persistence—in the profession and then go on to describe changes I would make—in admissions policies, in curriculum, and in the hurdles students must leap in pursuing the degree—were I actually given the mandate the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching suggested when it asked "If you could start *de novo*, what would the features of a Ph.D. program in your field be?"

To begin, I would ask that we look honestly and carefully at the culture of English studies, to determine how much of the paternalism and patronizing is still with us. For the last six or seven years, I've traveled extensively to other campuses, visiting dozens of departments each year. At every stop, I meet with graduate students and ask them about the atmosphere in their own departments. Too often, I hear stories that echo my own; often I receive email or mail after a visit, from students who didn't feel able to speak in public about harmful attitudes in their own departments.

One student wrote to send a letter she had written but never sent to its recipient. Addressed "Dear Dr. Professor," this letter described in detail how overcome with awe the new Ph.D. students were in his class: "We hung on every word and marveled at your vast store of knowledge, your provocative interpretations, even your digressions and comical drawings." But the magic soon wears off and students realize that they are no closer to engaging the challenges of some very difficult material than they were when the course began. Still, no one objects; instead they sit and take notes and wait for an opening to speak. Sometimes, a male class member ventures something, but seldom a female. The class wears on, and this student writer leaves it thinking hard about withdrawing from graduate school: "Too bad," she says, "that I'm leaving this course feeling just as separate from, intimidated by, in awe of, and

ultimately uninterested in [the great texts we were being introduced to] as I was when I entered. Sometimes I wonder if that's what you actually want—to keep us from joining some charmed inner circle of knowledge."[1]

I received the "Dear Dr. Professor" letter a couple of years ago. Much more recently—in fact, just a few months ago, I got another letter from a white woman who had just managed to complete a dissertation in one of our most distinguished and elite departments. In the letter, she recounts her struggles and concludes that she would never have had the strength to continue toward the degree, given the virulent arguments among members of her committee and the opposing mandates she was being given by them—except for the support of one senior woman, not even a member of the committee, who worked extensively with her, providing encouragement and support. She concludes her letter, "What I learned in my Ph.D. is that I do not want to be part of such a profession. But I am enormously grateful to one lone woman who, at the end of my ordeal, showed me what graduate school could—and should—be like."

Over the years, I have also heard frequently from students of color who voice frustration and disenchantment with English studies in general and with their departments in particular. At best, they feel patronized; at worst, shunned. A number of students share a similar story of a faculty member saying to them out right that they were admitted only because they were Latino, African American, Chicana, and so on. One graduate student put it this way: "Early on, then, I knew that my presence was a tokenized one, unlike other grad students in the Department—though as I thought about it later, I wondered whether or not all the other graduate students were in some way tokens too."

As I write, I can almost hear the protestations: it's not like that here . . . or here . . . or here. Indeed, I think most departments now take pride in their recruitment of women and people of color. But if you look beyond the surface in almost any department, you can find stories like the ones I have told here; most of us just aren't comfortable hearing them, much less looking for them. But if these stories didn't have salience, then why is our profession—especially at the top of the academic ladder—still overwhelmingly white and male?

For over thirty years, the MLA Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession has tracked answers to this question. In its most recent report, the committee reports that a larger percentage of women and students of color are entering graduate school, though the committee notes that this change is occurring at a time when employment opportunities are drying up and when fewer white men are entering the field. "Are the employment opportunities in literary study declining (even relative to those in other disciplines) in relation to the declining presence of white men, that is, to the degree to which white women and women of color have begun to take up positions that reflect their contribution to the profession?" (192-3).

In spite of the growing numbers, white women and colleagues of color are not finding the success that the increasing numbers should indicate; white men continue to hold tenured positions and professorial rank far in excess of the percentage of the profession they represent. The recent MLA Committee on the Status of Women report provides national data that indicate that, in English, "the largest group of white men were full professors; the largest group of men

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[1] The students I quote have given me permission to report their words but not their names.

of color were associate professors; the largest group of women of color were assistant professors; and the largest group of white women were instructors, adjuncts, or of similar rank (201). A closer look at the survey reveals that the actual numbers of men and women of color are pitiably small.

In short, while women and people of color are coming into our graduate programs in larger numbers than ever before, they are not faring nearly as well in persevering and in moving up through the ranks of the profession. And part of this problem must surely relate to departmental culture, to the kind of patronizing attitudes that I've described, and also to our continued reliance on agonism, on competition, on individually derived and held authority, and on hierarchy as the currency with which we gain admittance to and advance in our profession. Surely it is time that we heeded Linda Hutcheon's eloquent MLA Presidential Address and recognized that the wolf-like atmosphere she described so well is helpful, at most, to a very small number of our students and colleagues, and that it is especially limiting to faculty members and graduate students who are women and people of color.

Recently, members of our profession urged that we at least begin to name such exclusionary practices. In its latest report, the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on the Professionalization of Ph.D.'s stated, for example:

> The committee feels strongly that equity and diversity demand that we not ignore this responsibility [to let students know what the reality is in terms of seeking jobs and advancing in the profession]. As Robert A. Gross has articulated the problem, 'It was one thing for female and minority Ph.D.'s to enter an arena from which they had previously been excluded, quite another to find their way through a maze of informal practices that was often impenetrable even to white males. The absence of female and minority role models on the faculty made that progress all the more difficult.' (203)

Those role models on the faculty have stories of their own about such difficulties and hierarchies. Listen to Victor Villanueva, now Professor of English at Washington State University, look back on a rejection that still troubles him:

> I have ... had a fellow worker bleed in green and red over a paper I had wished to submit for publication, have gotten the maybe-you-could-consider-submitting-this-essay-somewhere-else letter from journal editors. That's just part of the job. But I have [also] felt insulted. Some years have passed, and I have forgotten the editor who had written this rejection letter; I've even forgotten the journal, I realize as I write this. But I still bear a grudge. The essay challenged the idea of a postcolonialism, invoking Frantz Fanon. The Rejecter said he saw no reason to resurrect Fanon. The essay also cited Aristotle and Cicero. Their resurrection went unquestioned. Rejecter also said he feared that in bringing in Fanon, I risked essentializing. ... In the years that have followed that infuriating letter, I have seen my concerns in that essay echoed, seen a rekindled interest in Fanon grow and grow, and have heard how others of color have been insulted by a particular use of the word 'essentializing.' (655)

In another piece, Beverly Moss, currently Associate Professor of English and Director of Ohio State's Center for the Study and Teaching of English and a tenured member of the English Department, says,

> One of my most disturbing moments in graduate school occurred when my professor in a critical theory course wrote on my final paper that my 'language was not sophisticated enough to handle the sophisticated ideas of critical theory.' As a twenty-two-year-old graduate student, I understood that he was trying to tell me that I did not belong in graduate school, that people like me were not smart enough. I understood that I was the only person of color in his class (and in the entire graduate program) and that he never spoke to me the entire semester. I understood that I was not an acceptable audience in his class. And because I had imagined my audience for the paper I wrote in his class to be people like me, I was an unacceptable audience for this academic exercise. As I went further in the profession, I began to understand that this professor was appalled by my attempt to discuss Hegel and Heidegger in a language other than [the most current jargon]. And finally, I understood that in my own naïve way, I was trying to cross a line or blur a boundary; some would consider it a class line, some a color line, some even a gender line, perhaps all three. I am no longer naïve about my attempts to cross those lines. (167-8)

Beverly Moss is certainly not naïve, and she continues as a role model and exemplary mentor. She is also—by my last count—the last person of color to be promoted up through the ranks at her university—and that tenure was granted a decade ago.

I have taken time to give voice to graduate students and colleagues because I am convinced that their stories are not anomalous. I am also convinced that their stories would be different if we would examine our admission practices and, especially, our retention practices, in graduate school and through the ranks. Attitudes like the ones that kept me out of a Ph.D. program may have lessened, but these stories suggest that they are not altogether gone. In addition, the intense culture of competition that our graduate programs foster is guaranteed to discourage those who do not prefer that mode of discursive behavior, effectively shutting them out of our Ph.D. programs and our profession.

What would admission policies[2] that were inclusive, that did not favor intense competition, look like? For one thing, such policies would abjure the GRE, admitting once and for all that these scores always favor white students. In addition, admissions committees could (and, I think, should) look for signs of multiple intelligences by asking for more than an academic writing sample. Why not consider, for example, evidence of excellence in forms of public service or teaching, or other work-related talents? And why not recognize once and for all that an amazing student can easily emerge from a low-prestige school—and look upon the chance to open historical, literary, and theoretical doors for that student rather than think of having to "remediate." Finally, admissions committees could look at statements of teaching goals, giving applicants an opportunity to connect what they have learned about literature and language with how they wish to develop as teachers who are serious about "professing." Taking teaching

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[2] As it stands now, most admissions committees typically consider the stature of the program from which an applicant comes, along with that person's GRE scores (some departments set a minimum that must be met for consideration), statement of purpose, letters of reference, and a writing sample. As a whole, this set of requirements invites and indeed demands high competition, and it privileges those who have been able to attend the most prestigious schools as well as those who have begun to "talk the talk" of the profession.

into consideration in our admissions deliberations would be one way of strengthening that challenge and changing the mixed messages we have been giving graduate students for a very long time about the relationship between scholarship and teaching.

In the most recent issue of *Profession*, John Guillory comments on our profession's long-time antipathy to "the very idea of pedagogy," an antipathy he interrogates and begins to challenge (169). Elaine Showalter also takes up the question of teaching in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece, saying that the new conversations on teaching "are both welcome and long overdue" (Para 4). Showalter turns to the example of drama, where a focus on teaching as performance offers a possible disciplinary model, and she reports on the approach taken in the UK, where pedagogy has been more seriously engaged than it has been here. Showalter might also have pointed to the extensive research on teaching carried out by scholars of rhetoric and writing studies; indeed, the literature in that field about teaching both reading and writing is extensive, and *College English*, an old and distinguished journal with a very wide circulation, regularly publishes articles on the teaching of literature, language, and writing. We thus have no shortage of models for rethinking our relationship to pedagogy, and a natural place to begin this rethinking is in our graduate programs, by bringing our student colleagues into serious engagement with the issues of how best to teach (and to learn) language, literature, and writing.

Changing the exclusionary culture of our departments through such things as admissions policies or more rigorous attention to teaching is one way to rethink the Ph.D. Another is to consider carefully what students actually do during their years of graduate study, in terms of courses they take, the classes they TA for and teach, and the series of hoops all students must pass through in securing the degree.[3] In "The Ph.D. in English: Towards a New Consensus," Gerald Graff notes that the English doctoral program has moved from "a relatively stable institution with pre-established rules and conventions to which students conformed to a do-it-yourself kit that depends for its shape on each student's particular interests and creative initiative." Graff argues that these changes have, taken as a whole, been beneficial, and I agree, since they can admit of a very wide interpretation of English studies and make room for new and often breathtakingly imaginative projects. These *de facto* changes, however, carry with them an implicit and very important redefinition of the subjects or Bakhtinian heroes of the field—reading and writing. In other words, such changes reflect changes in what our students are doing as well as in how they are (re)defining our subjects of study. Look around at the projects graduate students are working on now and you will find a very broad definition of "literature" and of reading, a definition that clearly includes film, video, multimedia and hypertext, and discourses not traditionally thought of as "literature" (such as Deaf and Spoken Word poetry, cookbooks, tombstone inscriptions) right alongside studies of canonical writers and their print texts. In terms of "writing," an expanded definition is also clearly emerging, as what counts as writing now often includes sound, video, and images of all kinds as well as a wide and growing

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[3] In most English Ph.D. programs, students take a specified number of courses, after which an examination of some sort qualifies them for candidacy to the Ph.D. Such exams may include everything from an oral exam aimed at establishing "coverage" to written exams on a student's major and minor fields of study and/or dissertation project. Thereafter, students present dissertation prospectuses (which may or may not be accompanied by another exam), write a dissertation under the supervision of a faculty director and several committee members, and then participate in a dissertation defense before graduating.

range of genre and discourses, from African American Vernacular English to Spanglish to American Sign Language. Rather than seeing such discourses and forms as marginal or as something "extra" added to the curriculum, I favor curricula that embrace these forms as their purview. Of course learning to teach new forms, new discourses, new genres, even new formats presents a challenge, but many in English studies have already gained such expertise and stand ready to teach others.

What I have said thus far argues implicitly for thinking of English studies—of what we and our students do—as encompassing literature, language, and writing. I am well aware that many departments do not now define themselves in this way; indeed, the last dozen years have seen the rise of new departments (or sometimes programs) of writing and/or rhetoric and of creative writing that stand distinct from departments that focus narrowly on the reading of American and British literature. And many departments have reduced their teaching of language courses, from Old and Middle English to applied linguistics, discourse analysis, and so on. Some would argue that this trend toward division and separation is of long standing: some 35 years ago, William Riley Parker tracked the break-up of English Studies through the withdrawal from the Modern Language Association of several groups, including those that founded the National Council of Teachers of English [1911], the Speech Communication Association [1914], and the Linguistics Society of America [1924].

In spite of such break-ups, as Graff and others have demonstrated, a rough consensus has held in English studies that often allowed for the study of literature, writing, and language to coexist and even—sometimes—profit mutually. The trend toward separation into narrowly-defined departments of literature, writing and rhetoric, and creative writing may continue, but if it does, it will be in stark contradiction to the new and expansive definitions of reading and writing described above. Separating reading and writing (and, in fact, sub-dividing writing) seems especially counter productive, given the ways in which these communicative acts are merging in electronic communication and in the media and the ways in which new and developing genres make it increasingly difficult to categorize writing into the old, familiar modes.

If graduate study in English can be described as more open-ended and wide-ranging "do it yourself kit," and if it can encompass the broad (re)definitions of reading and writing I have offered, what will hold English together—what will serve as the glue that the old standard curriculum and rules used to provide? First, a clear and detailed articulation of what constitutes the purview of English studies—no matter how far-ranging—would help to accomplish this goal. More important, however, would be rethinking the work students do in our graduate programs[4].

In regard to introductory course work for the Ph.D., I am in partial agreement with Graff, who has been admonishing us for many years to "teach the conflicts" and who proposes in his Carnegie essay that we "organize introductory [graduate] courses around contested issues." I would, however, modify Graff's suggestion in at least two ways. First, I would think of the introductory work of the Ph.D. not primarily in terms of individual courses; rather, students

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[4] While it is quite difficult to generalize, I think it safe to say that most Ph.D. programs require some form of introduction to theories and methods in the field as well as demonstrated reading mastery of one or more languages and a minimum number of individual courses in English and American literature.

entering the Ph.D. should grapple with large questions and projects, which they would undertake with at least several other students. These projects should in my view focus on major issues in much the way Graff describes: what *is* American Literature? What counts as "the best" writing? Are there better, and worse, ways of reading texts? What is the relationship between literature, broadly conceived, and its media? Taking on a major issue and working with others to explore its many nuances would introduce students not only to important ideas and information in our field but also and importantly introduce them to the powerful effects of collaboration. I have written at length (some would say *ad nauseam*) on the benefits of collaboration for the humanities. Here I will just say that a growing body of evidence suggests that advanced work in the Humanities increasingly calls for the kind of research that one solitary scholar is unlikely to be able to do. David Winter, who collaborated with other historians, editors, directors, and artists to produce *The Great War* argues that this project—which has the potential to shape a generation's understanding—would have been utterly impossible to do alone. By introducing our graduate students to the possibilities and potential of collaborative research, and offering them a means of engaging in it productively, we can begin training a generation of students who can take up Winters's challenge.

Making such a change to the introductory year (or first two years) of Ph.D. work would bring it with other changes as well. It would almost certainly militate against any kind of general coverage exam of the kind I took at the end of my M.A. degree (a two-hour ordeal, as I recall, during which I was to answer questions on a list of texts, from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf), and which still caps the first year or so of Ph.D. work in some programs. Rather the kind of collaborative research projects I have been describing would call for performative exams, with students preparing written documents, both individually and collaboratively written, and presenting the results of their research to the larger departmental and university community. In some ways, such a system would echo the qualifying papers some departments now call for, though broadening them to include collaboratively written work. In other ways, it would echo the system used in many Canadian and some European universities, where Ph.D. candidates make formal presentations of their doctoral research to "all comers." In any event, such a change in the examination or qualifying framework would be commensurate with the new definitions of reading and writing I have offered here; it would connect the student candidate's research and teaching; and it would focus in beneficial ways on the growing prominence of what Walter Ong calls "secondary orality," that is spoken presentation that is already very much inflected by writing.

Readers still with me have no doubt guessed where I'm going, and that is squarely toward the notion of Ph.D. students engaging in large-scale research projects, including dissertations, during their tenure. While students should always have the choice of taking a narrow and highly defined topic (gambling in eighteenth-century writing; early modern women's prefaces to translations; a reading of two 1930s women poets), they should also have an opportunity to engage the kind of project that calls for more than one researcher (one that, for example, required complete fluency in several languages; one that required expertise in digital media; one that combined two or more disciplines). Allowing for collaborative dissertations will present a great challenge to our imaginations and our organizational abilities: such projects would have to be carefully delimited and described; they would need to require the work of more than one person; and they would have to demonstrate equal contributions on the part of all parties. But they are not impossible to conceive. Indeed, I am aware of two collaboratively

written dissertations that have been accepted by their departments, and at the last MLA Conference on the Future of Doctoral Education, an entire working group entertained this issue, with at least some members arguing forcefully for such opportunities for our students. Here we might be wisest to let our students lead us: they are the ones who are conceiving such projects, and they have solid and imaginative ways of going about this work. We have much to learn from listening to them.

A Ph.D. program with any of the features I have described would necessarily be one in which graduate students are colleagues rather than acolytes, our partners in exploring major issues, in constructing new knowledge, and in sharing the wealth of our experiences, our learning, and our teaching. In such an atmosphere, a focus on pedagogy would be right and necessary, though rather than students taking pedagogy seminars or "training workshops" aimed at instructing them in how to be good TAs for large classes or how to conduct first-year writing classes, they would become members of ongoing teaching/pedagogy circles that would include faculty, staff, and graduate students, again working collaboratively on major questions facing all teachers of English: what do our pedagogical practices suggest about the theories we hold? How do we best engage all students in productive and cooperative intellectual debate? How can we create assignments that call forth the best and most diverse thinking, writing, and speaking of which our students are capable? How can we create an effective classroom ethos? How do we respond to and evaluate student work in ways that are rigorous and honest but not appropriative? How can we establish and share authority among participants? How do we develop and share knowledge both in and out of the classroom?

Ideally, these teaching or pedagogy circles would be small, with faculty and student co-coordinators who would work together to present an agenda to be considered by all. In addition, these groups would offer multiple opportunities for teaching and team-teaching, with time for careful response and follow-up and time for students to make explicit and lasting connections between their research and their teaching. Team teaching could serve as a compelling replacement for the system of using graduate students as teaching assistants who lead discussion sections, meet with the students, and grade written work while the faculty member is engaged primarily with lecturing. Working with a graduate student or students to plan and develop materials for a course, prepare and deliver the lectures, meet with and counsel the students, and respond to class assignments would do much more to prepare graduate students for taking on courses of their own than the present TA system, which all too often assigns sole responsibility for a writing class from the moment a graduate student enters the program; indeed, some programs rely on beginning graduate students to teach two, and sometimes even three, such courses. Some universities already have such a team teaching plan in place, though all too often it is instituted as a way to teach more students at lower costs (a faculty lecturer and three teaching assistants, for example, "teaching" 100+ students) rather than as a way to focus the department's attention on pedagogy and to mentor and prepare new members of our profession. In my view, graduate students should have an opportunity to design and teach (or team teach) several courses during their Ph.D. programs, including introductory courses in writing, in language, and in at least one field of literature.

Rethinking the Ph.D. along the rough lines I have presented here would go a long way toward opening up our discipline to new and exciting voices and toward resisting the hierarchy that still informs most of our departmental structures and practices. Such a rethinking also has the

potential to bring the work we do more directly into the public eye, offering us an opportunity to demonstrate the importance of our work to the public good. Toward that end, Ph.D. programs might well follow the example of several departments in engaging faculty and students in community outreach projects. One well-developed and very effective program is in place at Carnegie Mellon, where members of the Department have worked for years to establish and maintain a vibrant community literacy center and where graduate students work with members of the center to bring about change and work for social justice in their community. Moving in such a direction would offer opportunities for engaging literacy – reading, writing, speaking – in a variety of settings; such contact would almost certainly double back around to inform the research graduate students undertake during the Ph.D. It would also bring faculty and students more directly in contact with the work of the public schools. And that contact in turn could lead the way toward focusing more directly on the job of preparing teachers for our nation's schools. Finally, working within the community reinforces the practice of collaboration, of shared knowledge production, of responsibility (and what Bakhtin calls response-ability), and of merging literacy practices advocated in earlier parts of this essay.

Can we rethink the Ph.D. in ways that will make our programs more open and inclusive, more truly diverse, more responsive to the dreams and desires of our students, more connected to emerging definitions of reading and writing, more collaborative, more engaged with issues close to the hearts of our communities? *Of course we can.*

ANDREA LUNSFORD is currently Professor of English and Director of the Program in Writing and Rhetoric at Stanford University. She has designed and taught undergraduate and graduate courses in writing history and theory, rhetoric, literacy and intellectual property. Before joining the Stanford faculty, she was Distinguished Professor of English and Director of the Center for the Study of Teaching of Writing at The Ohio State University. Professor Lunsford's interests include rhetorical theory, women in rhetoric, collaboration, cultures of writing, style, and technologies of writing. She has written or coauthored fourteen books. She has also served as Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication and Chair of the Modern Language Association Division on Writing, and as a member of the MLA Executive Council.

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